



Region 2 Headquarters  
3201 Spurgin Road  
Missoula, MT 59804

March 20, 2018

Dear Interested Citizens:

Thank you for your consideration of a proposal by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) to renew for another 6 years, a Cooperative Habitat Management Agreement with the Blackfoot River Ranch (BRR) that has been successfully implemented between 2006 and 2018. This renewed Agreement would continue to introduce limited cattle grazing by the BRR on approximately 354 acres of historically cultivated land on FWP's Aunt Molly Wildlife Management Area (WMA, NW of Helmville in Powell County), thus improving fall re-growth and winter forage quality for elk and deer.

In exchange, the BRR would adhere to a FWP-prescribed rest-rotation grazing management plan on both FWP pastures and approximately 640 acres of BRR's nearby private rangeland. These private pastures provide important native elk and deer winter range, and the landowners also allow public fall hunting access to the property.

Enclosed is a decision document in which FWP explains its rationale for choosing the Proposed Action alternative and recommending that the Fish & Wildlife Commission approve this Agreement as proposed. Upon completion of the public involvement process and by including this Decision Notice, FWP accepts the draft environmental assessment (EA) as final.

FWP will request approval for the proposed Cooperative Habitat Management Agreement from the Fish & Wildlife Commission at its scheduled meeting on April 19, 2018 in Livingston. This meeting is open to the public, as are other regularly scheduled Commission meetings.

Please feel free to contact me at 406-542-5500 with any questions you may have. Thank you for your interest and participation.

Sincerely,

Randy Arnold  
Regional Supervisor

RA/sr

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***Montana Fish,  
Wildlife & Parks***

**Decision Notice for  
Aunt Molly WMA and Blackfoot River Ranch  
Cooperative Habitat Management Agreement  
Draft EA**

Prepared by:  
Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks  
Region 2 Wildlife  
3201 Spurgin Road, Missoula, MT 59804  
March 2018

**DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION ALTERNATIVE**

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposes to renew a Cooperative Habitat Management Agreement with the Blackfoot River Ranch (BRR, Lessee) that has been successfully implemented between 2006 and 2018. This renewed 6-year Agreement would continue to introduce limited cattle grazing by the BRR upon approximately 354 acres of historically cultivated land on FWP's Aunt Molly Wildlife Management Area (WMA, located NW of Helmville in Powell County), thus improving fall re-growth and winter forage quality for elk and deer.

In exchange, the BRR would adhere to a FWP-prescribed rest-rotation grazing management plan on both FWP's WMA pastures and approximately 640 acres of BRR's nearby private native rangeland. These private pastures provide important native elk and deer winter range. The landowners also allow public fall hunting access to the property.

The FWP Habitat Bureau monitored past FWP-BRR lease agreements (2006 and 2012), including field inspections and vegetation assessments. FWP has documented the Lessee's compliance with prescribed grazing plans, proactive weed treatment of leased lands, and a general improvement of habitat quality on both FWP and involved private land. FWP has received no reports of conflicts between the Lessee (or its livestock) and recreational users of the WMA. The winter range on and public hunting access to the private land included in the past lease (and similarly proposed here) are highly valued by the public.

## **ALTERNATIVE CONSIDERED TO THE PROPOSED ACTION**

### **No Action:**

If the no action alternative were to be selected, the 6-year Cooperative Habitat Management Lease with BRR would not be renewed. FWP would not obtain benefits such as improved fall re-growth and winter forage quality for elk and deer on the Aunt Molly WMA via limited cattle grazing, as well as improved range condition on nearby private rangeland that provide important native elk and deer winter range.

## **MONTANA ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT PROCESS**

FWP is required to assess potential impacts of its proposed actions to the human and physical environment under the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA), as well as evaluate those impacts through an interdisciplinary approach, including public input, and make a decision based on this information. The Aunt Molly WMA and Blackfoot River Ranch Cooperative Habitat Management Lease Agreement proposal and its effects were documented by FWP in a Draft Environmental Assessment (EA).

## **PUBLIC REVIEW PROCESS**

FWP released a Draft EA for public review of the Aunt Molly WMA and Blackfoot River Ranch Cooperative Habitat Management Lease Agreement proposal on February 20 and accepted public comment until March 12, 2018, a comment period of 21 days.

Legal notice of the proposal and availability of the Draft EA was published once each in the *Independent Record* (Helena, February 20), *Missoulian* (February 20), *Seeley Swan Pathfinder* (Feb 22), and *Silver State Post* (Deer Lodge, Feb 21) newspapers.

FWP mailed 16 copies of the Draft EA, and emailed approximately 29 notifications of the EA's availability, to adjacent landowners, interested individuals, groups and agencies. The EA was available for public review and comment on FWP's web site (<http://fwp.mt.gov/>, "Recent Public Notices" and "Submit Public Comments") from February 20 through March 12, 2018.<sup>1</sup>

## **SUMMARY OF PUBLIC COMMENT**

FWP received no public input during the 21-day comment period for this proposed Agreement.

## **FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT**

FWP has reviewed the EA and applicable laws, regulations, and policies and has determined that this action will not have significant effect on the human or physical environment. Therefore, I conclude that the EA is the appropriate level of analysis and the preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement is not necessary.

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<sup>1</sup> The Draft EA is available on FWP's website at: [http://fwp.mt.gov/news/publicNotices/environmentalAssessments/developmentImprovementsAndEnhancements/pn\\_0378.html](http://fwp.mt.gov/news/publicNotices/environmentalAssessments/developmentImprovementsAndEnhancements/pn_0378.html) (Accessed 14 March 2018).

## DECISION

Based on the analysis in the Draft EA and lack of public comment opposing or suggesting changes to the Proposed Action, I have selected the Proposed Action alternative. I will recommend to the Fish and Wildlife Commission that it approve FWP's proposal to enter in a 6-year Cooperative Habitat Management Agreement involving FWP land (354 acres in Aunt Molly WMA) with the Blackfoot River Ranch (640 acres of private land). FWP will allow limited cattle grazing on the Aunt Molly WMA; in exchange, the BRR would adhere to a FWP-prescribed rest-rotation grazing management plan on approximately 640 acres of BRR's nearby private native rangeland.

## CONCLUSION

By notification of this Decision Notice, the draft EA is hereby made the final EA. The finding of selection for the Proposed Action alternative is the product of this Decision Notice.



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Randy Arnold  
Regional Supervisor

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3/20/2018  
Date